Photos: Judy Hammett, RN

Sue Sherrod, MD, traded her anesthesiology skills for wilderness ways on her history-making canoe trip with three female companions down the Yukon River.

MD among first women to canoe Yukon

A 41-year-old anesthesiologist has made her mark in Alaskan history as one of the first women to canoe down the 2,000-mile Yukon River.

Although she has six years of canoeing experience, Sue Sherrod, MD, and her companions never had tackled such a task. Instead of training for their 76-day journey, they toughened up along the way.

"We developed muscles we never knew we had — and some we wished we never had," Dr. Sherrod said. The upper stretches of the river are fairly swift, so the group had time to gain strength propelling their two 17-foot canoes before the river widened and slowed.

Although less swift, the lower Yukon provided some of the most dangerous moments. During one 13-day period of wind and rain, the women had to keep their canoes from being swamped by 3- to 4-foot waves whipped up by 40-mph wind gusts. Those were the good days. Sometimes they could not leave camp at all.

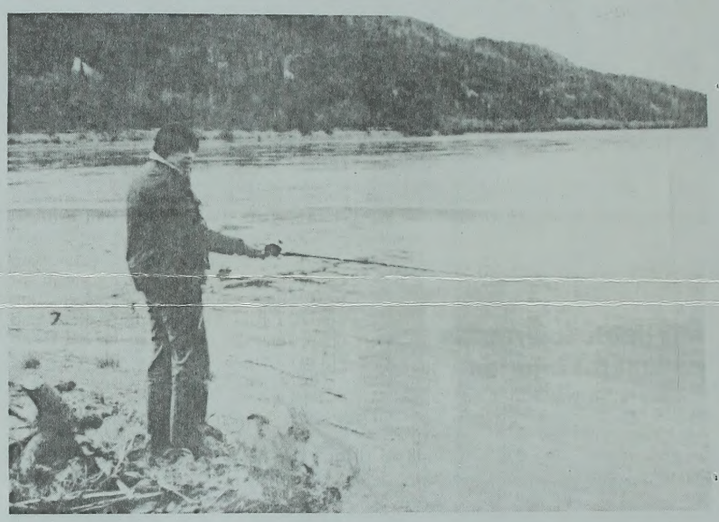
THE WOMEN, with their approximately 900 pounds of gear, were self-sufficient, but they did stop at villages along the river. Although geographically separated, the river communities are close-knit, so curious residents often were ready to offer hospitality to the expedition.

Even though some towns did not have electricity, much less medical facilities, Dr. Sherrod was not in demand as a physician. She said people in the back country are used to doing things on their own, using either traditional or more modern, self-taught practices. Easily available air travel provides a backup for the most serious problems.

THE WOMEN'S major medical crisis came when Judy Hammett, RN, severely sprained her ankle about two-thirds of the way down the river. Ankle braces and pain pills kept her functioning. At night the group would plop her in front of the campfire and surround her with everything necessary to make dinner. With little mobility on the rocky or marshy riverbank, she became the expedition's chef.

Although they were ravaged by mosquitoes and lived in constant threat of bears, Dr. Sherrod and her friends loved the river. Few other places offer the opportunity to travel a largely uncivilized, undammed river that not only gives a person wilderness experience, but also offers insight into what she called "an entirely different culture and way of life" that draws on Indians, other native Alaskans, and even Gold Rush pioneers.

Back with her group practice in Dallas, Dr. Sherrod said the trip was good material for her planned book, but "I wouldn't want to live up there. I don't like salmon that much. I'm not kidding. You are lost up there if you don't like salmon."



Above, Dr. Sherrod fishes for grayling, a game fish of the salmon family. Below, she makes entries in her journal, which will be the basis of a book on her trip.

Hungry mosquitoes made adequate skin protection essential.

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